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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ABUJA 000313

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [EAGR](#) [ETRD](#) [EINV](#) [NI](#)  
SUBJECT: NIGERIA: AMBASSADOR AND BENUE GOVERNOR DISCUSS  
AGRICULTURAL PARTNERSHIPS

Classified By: Political Counselor Walter Pflaumer for reasons 1.4. (b  
& d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The Ambassador paid a courtesy call on Benue Governor Gabriel Suswam (People's Democratic Party - PDP) at Government House in Makurdi on February 12 (PolOff notetaker). The discussion focused primarily on agricultural collaboration and partnerships, but also touched upon the potential for ethnic clashes such as recently occurred in Jos, a possibility Suswam described as very remote for his state. Afterwards, the Governor and Ambassador visited a rice plant which is a model public-private partnership and participant in USAID's "MARKETS" (Maximizing Agricultural Revenue and Key Enterprises in Targeted Sites) program. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) The meeting commenced with Governor Suswam expressing his affinity for the United States and describing his numerous visits there, most recently for the inauguration of President Obama. In July 2008, Suswam led a delegation to Iowa to meet with Governor Chet Culver to further a partnership in the field of agriculture, at which time he also addressed a joint session of the Iowa state legislature.

#### AGRICULTURAL AND INVESTMENT ISSUES

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13. (U) The Ambassador expressed her desire to promote greater American investment in Nigeria, particularly in the areas of agriculture and energy, via a conference including various Nigerian state executives and representatives of U.S.-based industries. The governor agreed that a Davos-like strategic approach to establish both public and private sector contacts would enable better matches between states and potential investors. Suswam described some past disappointing experiences with foreign investment, especially in regard to a Dutch joint venture to produce cassava flour, a project which he said ended after repeated failures by the firm's management to pay previously agreed capital contributions and royalties to the state government. Nevertheless, he was optimistic about future collaborations, and invited the USG to help identify a suitable partner for the failed cassava flour operation.

¶4. (U) Suswam discussed at length Benue's partnership and newly signed memorandum of understanding with the Iowa State University (ISU) Extension Service for agricultural technical assistance, and the rebuilding of the Benue swine industry. Included in the agreement are provisions for sending promising students and educators in agricultural science, as well as relevant Nigerian state officials, to ISU for study with a view to establishing a "train the trainers" program in modern farming and animal husbandry techniques, including artificial insemination of livestock. Benue is also consulting with ISU Extension Service personnel on the establishment of a demonstration farm and the purchase of the most appropriate equipment for promoting mechanized planting and harvesting to boost production. Suswam also mentioned ongoing discussions with officials in Argentina about help in the development of a cattle industry in Benue.

¶5. (U) According to Suswam, Benue's biggest markets are Lagos and the southeast, including Port Harcourt. Nevertheless, he noted that during the growing season, over 200 vehicles a day leave Benue markets carrying produce and other agricultural products to markets all over Nigeria. The Ambassador mentioned that under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), about 6,800 products are eligible for duty-free importation to the United States, a prospect that greatly interested Suswam. While noting Benue's and Nigeria's "great potential to export agricultural products," she stressed that it was essential that businesses be export-ready. The Ambassador offered to look into the possibility of the Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) bringing

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experts on phytosanitary standards and current U.S. import regulations to Nigeria for a workshop, perhaps from the USAID-funded West Africa Trade Hub in Ghana. (Note: Per our Agricultural Attach, we understand that the phytosanitary expert will be based in Dakar and will arrive this summer. End note.) The Ambassador invited the Governor and his Commissioner for Agriculture to a June conference in Lagos on AGOA, trade and agriculture.

¶6. (U) Governor Suswam mentioned that funds had been set aside in the 2009 state budget to create a state marketing board to promote Benue exports. He also acknowledged a 1980s arrangement which Benue had with the U.K. to export oranges, mangoes and pineapples, but inferred that the agreement never lived up to expectations. Suswam lamented a lack of proper storage facilities and food processing capacity, and pointed out that a substantial amount of yams from Benue is sent to Benin and Ghana for processing, and then exported from there to the U.S. and elsewhere.

#### ETHNIC ISSUES AND POTENTIAL FOR CONFLICT

¶7. (C) The Ambassador asked about the status of ethnic tensions and communal conflicts in the state, specifically between the Jukun, Kuteb and other "indigenes" and the predominant Tivs whom these other groups consider "settlers". She noted the recent problems in Jos and wondered whether the same sort of violence seen there in November could happen in Benue. Suswam categorically dismissed such a notion. (Comment: Suswam is a Tiv but has reportedly made efforts to quell tensions between local groups through meetings with local and traditional leaders, as well as between himself and the Governor of Taraba. The issue of "indigene" status remains politically charged in many (but not all) areas of Nigeria, as some states require an indigene certificate in order to serve in that state's civil service; it is also used to establish ethnic balance in national-level hiring. End comment.) Suswam claimed that indigene certificates are not required in Benue State, adding that the state capital, Makurdi, was actually a Hausa word meaning the "king of money," implying that Hausa are just as at home in Benue as Tivs. Regarding the risk of inter-religious conflict, Suswam noted that Muslims comprise less than one percent of Benue's

population (and "0.001% of Benue indigenes") and that violent conflict between various religious groups was thus extremely unlikely. Nevertheless, he suggested that some (unnamed) leaders played politics with ethnicity, particularly between the Tivs and Idoma at election time, but insisted that unity prevailed afterwards. He acknowledged that individual disputes, usually over land and alleged trespassing during planting season, occasionally took on a tribal or even interstate aspect. Suswam opined that these disagreements are further complicated by the fact that there is no clearly demarcated border between Benue and Taraba States -- and also between Benue and Cross River States -- a matter on which he claimed to be working with the Federal Government to resolve.

According to Suswam, the Jukun have been elected into local government, and "participate fully" in the administration of their lands, even though they control only one local council ward out of 268 and have only one member in the State Assembly, due to their small number.

18. (U) After the private meeting with the Governor, the Ambassador addressed a gathering of select officials of the state government and members of the State House of Assembly, and fielded questions from the press. She then proceeded with the Governor to an event at the Olam Rice Mill to highlight one of the successful public-private partnerships of USAID's "MARKETS" (Maximizing Agricultural Revenue and Key Enterprises in Targeted Sites) program. During the event, both the Ambassador and Governor Suswam noted that Nigeria should be self-sufficient in the production of rice, and in fact exporting it, rather than its current status as the world's second largest importer of the commodity.

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19. (C) COMMENT: Governor Gabriel Suswam is regarded as one of the most pragmatic, proactive and fiscally responsible of the Nigerian state governors. He has attended executive education courses at both the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard and the Center for International Development at Duke University. His team generally follows through on things, unlike others who have specifically requested help in agriculture, but whose state commissioners have yet to respond to offers of assistance. Benue, already considered the "breadbasket of the nation" certainly has the potential to become one of Nigeria's success stories, through agricultural exports to neighboring countries as well as to the U.S. Nevertheless, his assessment of the state of inter-ethnic relations in his state seems to underestimate existing tensions, as we know there have been several small-scale clashes which have led to fatalities. END COMMENT.  
SANDERS